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Pasta, Pizza, and Espresso



On hearing the name *Italy*, foreigners are apt to think first of food: of pasta, pizza, espresso, gelato, and wine from straw-clad flasks. Italians themselves, when abroad, are likely to have similar associations as they think of their own country. A deft publicity spot for a spaghetti company, shown on Italian television, presents an Italian business executive in a hotel room, the Manhattan skyline visible through the window, pulling a short piece of dry pasta, his good-luck charm, out of his pocket and wistfully looking at it. The viewer gets the message: The man is pining for his family back in Italy and for the spaghetti on their table. The voice-over: "Pasta Barilla means home." The brand name is stressed, but the accent should really be on *pasta*.

The French have long been scoffing at their southeastern neighbors as *les macaronis* or *les spaghettis*. To Italians themselves, a craving for pasta as a staple food that one can pleasurably eat every day the way Asians fill up on rice is as natural as their melodious language. Fondness for pasta is indeed an important facet of *italianità*, the essence of being Italian. Although cultured Italians wince at the hoary stereotype of "macaroni and mandolins," pasta is a test of collective identity for a people who until very recently had only a vague sense of nationhood.

Pasta, Pizza, and Espresso

When an Italian comes home from a trip abroad the first question from relatives and friends is likely to be "How did you eat?" The usual response is a grimace. And Italian newcomers arriving in a foreign city will always ask "Where can I get a decent plate of pasta?" If they don't find it they will be uncomfortable.

From the oldest times cereals have been an essential element in the diet of people living in what today is Italy. The ancient Romans enjoyed a kind of porridge, and ordinary people in antiquity subsisted for long periods on bread and cheese, figs, or grapes, and ate meat or fish only on special occasions. Slices of bread toasted with olive oil and seasoned with salt, garlic, or some other spice are probably a very ancient snack; as *bruschetta* this concoction is still offered as an appetizer by many simple eating places in Italy, and lately by a few fancy ones too.

One always hears that spaghetti (literally, "little strings") was brought from Cathay to Italy toward the end of the thirteenth century. The story that Marco Polo was the pioneer of pasta is dubious, but there are reasons to assume that thin noodles, a Chinese invention, did first become known to the West in his city on the lagoon. (Thanks to its far-flung trade relations, Venice introduced into Italy other exotic food items as well, such as artichokes, and it imported the first coffee beans.) The taste for spaghetti and kindred starchy dishes spread quickly throughout the peninsula and Sicily. Old prints show Neapolitan urchins happily eating thin noodles with their bare, and probably unwashed, hands; what they are so visibly enjoying is called vermicelli ("little worms").

Italian inventiveness has through the centuries created uncounted pasta variations, in ever new shapes and with new garnishings. Fettuccine, ribbons of egg pasta, often served drenched in butter, is said to have been invented by the court cooks of Duke Ercole I d'Este as a culinary tribute to Lucre-

zia Borgia, the daughter of Pope Alexander VI, when she arrived in Ferrara in 1501 to become the wife of the duke's son Alfonso: The golden ribbons were meant to celebrate the blond hair of the beautiful bride (who at the age of twenty-one already had two marriages behind her). Pasta factories were among Italy's first industries.

Today pasta is on the table of many, maybe most, Italian households at least once a day; some have the national dish for both lunch and dinner. To a friend who is down on his luck or to a poor relative one says, "There will always be a plate of pasta for you in my house." Even Italian cats will, though disdainfully, eat spaghetti if they are hungry and there is nothing else for them.

Sit down in any eating place in Italy, whether a truckers' haven or a two-star restaurant, and you will be asked, "Pasta?" Some patrons deem it necessary to justify their choice of, say, a clear soup, pleading a delicate or upset stomach. But then, minestrone and most other soups also contain pasta elements. And whenever Italian restaurants offer fixed-price meals for foreigners, their so-called tourist menu lists pasta as a first course.

Most Italians need filling pasta for lunch because they have eaten nothing or very little since the night before. Italian breakfasts are notoriously skimpy; many people have just a cup of espresso after they get out of bed and follow it with a cappuccino and a *cornetto* (croissant) later in the morning. By the time they sit down for lunch at 1:00 or 2:00 P.M., they are ravenous and will devour a heaped plate of spaghetti or ravioli as a starter.

Such insistence on pasta makes the normal Italian meal top-heavy; there are few choices for hors d'oeuvres, and the appetite for, and interest in, entrées is blunted. Gourmets often accuse the Italian cuisine of offering few options outside its classic first course. Yet within the family of pasta dishes,

the variety is endless. Each region has developed its own specialties: ravioli in the North, lasagne in "fat" Bologna, *pappardelle* with venison-based sauce in Tuscany, tortellini in Latium, macaroni and linguine in Naples, cannelloni in Sicily. Trimmings and seasonings range from greenish pesto—finely chopped basil, other herbs, and garlic mixed with cheese and pine nuts—in Genoa to clams in Naples and eggplant in Palermo. The town of Amatrice, just northeast of Rome, is famous for its *spaghetti all'amatriciana*, with bacon and pepper. In their search for gastronomic innovation to justify higher figures on the check, many restaurants are now dousing their pasta in whiskey or vodka, garnishing their dishes with salmon, or greasing them with Gorgonzola or Roquefort. Orthodox eaters will nevertheless request their spaghetti served just with fresh tomato pulp, the basic Neapolitan recipe.

Pasta should come *al dente*—somewhat chewy. Italians who order their national staple in eating places abroad always complain that what they get is *pasta scotta*—overcooked pasta, a mushy abomination. The Italian housewife or pasta cook often fishes out a length of spaghetti from the boiling pot and bites it to see whether it has reached the right consistency. Purists eat spaghetti, macaroni, or vermicelli with their fork alone, without needing a spoon to roll the strands into a neat bundle that they can shove into their mouth without unseemly sucking noises. Using a spoon with one's fork betrays fussiness; foreigners who do so are, however, regarded with indulgence. Cutting spaghetti with a knife is like putting catsup on a fruit salad.

Italians miss their pasta even if they are offered plenty of other food. After Rome was liberated from Nazi occupation in June 1944, the United States supplied K rations and other available provisions—but little pasta—for the hungry population. In the meantime the chief of the Allied provi-

sional military administration of the Italian capital, Colonel Charles Poletti, an Italian-American, broadcast frequent pep talks, suggesting among other things that the Romans ought to use more soap than, according to him, they were doing. Soon a satiric couplet appeared on local house walls in the tradition of the Roman pasquinades:

*Dear Colonel Poletti,
Less prattle and more spaghetti!*

When shipments of hard wheat arrived at last, Italian pasta factories resumed turning out the national staple in pre-war quality. In 1967 Italy enacted Law No. 580, providing that pasta must be made only of durum wheat. Twenty-one years later the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg, invoking its supranational powers, voided Italy's genuine-pasta legislation as an illegal restraint of trade within the European Community. A West German noodle company had run afoul of Italian customs authorities when it tried to market its soft-wheat products in the land of pasta al dente; the firm took the case to the Luxembourg court and won. The ruling ordered Italy to allow the importation of German-made pasta but told Rome it might require that the soft-wheat base be clearly stated in labeling. *Corriere della Sera* of Milan disgustingly headlined its report of the Luxembourg verdict: "Now We Have the Invasion of Overcooked Spaghetti."

Northern Italians eat other cereal dishes as well: risottos in Milan and Turin; and polenta (cornmeal mush) in Venice, the Friuli region, and Bergamo. But only pasta is the truly national dish. The closest runner-up is pizza, a Neapolitan invention that in a few decades has won popularity all over Italy and far beyond the country's frontiers.

What was nourishment for humble people in antiquity has become a trendy symbol of modern informality and youthful merriment. Maybe Sophia Loren, as a *pizzaiola* (pizza cook) bowing deep over her counter to offer her generous décolletage to best effect in the film *The Gold of Naples*, has made a decisive contribution to the global fortunes of the dish. Pizza is deceptively simple; a fine Italian hand is needed to make it come out just right.

There is archaeological evidence that in the Greek colony Neapolis, the "New City" that today is Naples, ovens in which pizza may have been baked were burning as early as 500 B.C. Hot pies, the prototypes of pizza, were surely eaten in nearby Pompeii before that prosperous town and resort for wealthy Romans was smothered by the ashes of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79. Horace had a name for the popular dish, *laganum*, the Latin form of a Greek word. *Pizza* is apparently derived from the Latin *picea*, "of pitch," which may have referred to either the texture or the color of the well-baked cake.

Already in the Middle Ages the flat pies were apparently often garnished with cheese. Tomato pulp became a standard condiment when the "golden apples," as the plump fruits were first called, reached Naples from Peru by way of Mexico in the late sixteenth century. The oldest mention of "pizza" in literature is found in a cycle of fantastic stories in the Neapolitan dialect that Giambattista Basile wrote in the early seventeenth century, a late echo of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

The first commercial pizzeria is said to have been opened in Naples by one Antonio Testa in the Salita Santa Teresa, a sloping alley in the old town, early in the nineteenth century. Ferdinand II, king of the Two Sicilies, reportedly asked for the products of the new shop to be sent to the royal palace from time to time and eventually titled Testa's son *monsù*,

the Neapolitan form of the French *monsieur*, which in the Naples of the Bourbon kings was almost like raising the *pizzaiolo* to knighthood. Still today, old Neapolitans will say of an exceptionally crisp pizza that it "seems made by Monsù Testa."

About half a century later, in 1889, another renowned Neapolitan pizza cook, Raffaele Esposito, was summoned to the royal residence to prepare the local culinary specialty for Queen Margherita, who was visiting the city with her husband (and cousin) King Umberto I. Esposito, eager to demonstrate his devotion to the queen and his loyalty to the new ruling dynasty, the Savoy, composed a pizza in the colors of unified Italy: green (basil leaves), white (mozzarella cheese), and red (tomato pulp). Testa's patriotic palette has been popular ever since as pizza Margherita. Unlike his Bourbon predecessor, the Savoy king did not confer any special honor on the pizza purveyor.

To Queen Margherita, a northerner with intellectual pretensions, the Neapolitan dish may have seemed an exotic experience, but for Neapolitans long before and after her time pizza has been a staple—often the only nourishment in their day. "A monument to misery" is how the writer and publisher Leo Longanesi characterized pizza.

The age-old poverty and forced frugality of the Neapolitan populace is epitomized by the famous institution of the *pizza a otto*, or eight-day pizza. It is the most elementary form of consumer credit: Eat now, pay a week later. The only collateral for such an interest-free edible loan is the goodwill of the *vicolo*, the slum alley. Hungry Neapolitan households have for generations weathered hard times by buying dinner from the pizzeria at the corner with payment deferred. The *pizzaiolo* was pretty sure he would get the money eventually. The promissory-note pizza was thought to belong to the realm of folklore—until the earthquake of November 1980

hit Naples and *pizza a otto* again helped poor slum dwellers survive the chaotic first few days after the disaster.

Esposito's tricolor recipe fit for a queen was one of the many embroideries on the canon of pizza making, which basically calls for just four elements: flour, leavening, water, and salt. Neapolitans are convinced that whatever housewives or even amateur gourmet cooks can get up in their home kitchens, not to mention the products of the modern frozen-food industry, will always be inferior to a pizza baked over a wood fire in the brick oven of a traditional pizzeria. Expert handling of the dough is the secret of any good pizza. Customarily the dough is allowed to "rest" and rise in a wooden trough overnight before it is thoroughly worked manually. It is shaped into a round cake with a strong rim and a thin center and put with a wooden spoon directly on the hot floor of the furnace, where it bakes for two to three minutes; popular wood is said to be best for the fire. The condiments are quickly put on the pizza, and the end product should be served piping hot.

Mozzarella, now regularly a fifth pizza ingredient, should be made from the curd of buffalo milk and, like the dough, is best if worked by hand in the old-fashioned way. The buffalo in question is the domesticated Asian water buffalo, which is still being bred in the wet plains around Naples. The soft and moist curd of its milk is squeezed, pulled, and stretched until it becomes rubbery and satiny; the cheese tastes best when consumed within twenty-four hours. Nowadays almost all mozzarella marketed in Italy and practically any mozzarella available in other countries is produced industrially from bovine milk or even powdered milk. It is not the same as buffalo mozzarella; it is saltier and lacks the delicate flavor that Queen Margherita found on her pizza.

The Southern Italians who started emigrating in great numbers to the United States, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, and

other countries in the Western Hemisphere in the days of Queen Margherita took their taste for pizza with them, and some of the newcomers were professional *pizzaioli*. In America the dish caught on and evolved, eventually breaking out of the Little Italies to become a broadly accepted snack, like hot dogs or bagels. Italians who today arrive for the first time in the United States are startled to see neon signs saying things like THE TOWER OF PIZZA and are baffled when they are offered a slice from a giant wheel of dough instead of the individual flat pie to which they are accustomed. (On the other hand, heaps of minipizzas as small as silver dollars, and sometimes nearly as hard, are carried around on platters at American cocktail parties.)

International pizza today comes in as many varieties as do sandwiches. In addition to mozzarella (or, in its place, ricotta), mushrooms, anchovies, shellfish and other seafood, herring, eggs, ham, bacon, green or black olives, eggplant, basil, oregano, garlic, capers, and slices of pineapple or banana are being lavished in kaleidoscopic patterns on the old pizza. In Japan rice flour is used for making pizza that is doused with catsup. Germans go in for pizza garnished with wurst and mustard.

In pizza's homeland, the ambience where it is eaten has changed too. Until well after World War II, *pizzerie* in Italy were mostly cramped little places with naked tables facing the oven. Walls were tiled or whitewashed, or maybe bore a clumsy fresco of the Bay of Naples with Mount Vesuvius in the background. Soldiers, still hungry after their barracks rations, used to be regulars in the evening hours. During the day young couples would drop in, and on Sunday afternoons clusters of maids, alone or with boyfriends, would chatter and giggle. Cheap wine out of ceramic jugs or beer was regularly drunk with pizza, but soft drinks as an accompaniment are now advancing.

While the *pizzerie* are still havens for people who cannot

or will not treat themselves to a full restaurant meal, many of these emporiums have been gussied up with wood paneling, plastic decor in bright colors, and garish lighting, and are staffed with young attendants in red or white uniforms. This is the Italian answer to the fast-food vogue. When one of these new luncheonettes was opened in Rome's center under the sign PIZZA POINT, it sounded like an echo of "hamburger joint." Even in Naples, quite a few of the three hundred *pizzerie* existing today use electric ovens and put industrial mozzarella on deep-frozen or precooked disks of dough. Old-timers have told me they've found better pizza in New York or San Francisco.

If the pizzeria is a piece of Naples in any corner of the world, the espresso machine has become a truly ubiquitous emblem of Italy. In Italy itself the smallest village has at least one, and in cities like Rome, Milan, and Naples many thousands are operated from early morning until late at night. One might conclude that Italians drink more coffee than anyone on earth, but the statistical truth is that Americans, Swedes, and Germans, among others, outrank Italians in per capita consumption of the beverage. Yet Italian espresso contains three to four times more caffeine than does the same quantity of American coffee.

A cup of espresso provides an instant injection of well-being and energy, a small rush that, alas, will last only twenty minutes or so. Espresso is a benign stimulant, a very soft drug. Darkly roasted, shiny, oily coffee beans are used, and a mixture of steam and water is forced by high pressure to extract the utmost strength from the finely ground beans. The word *espresso*, understood throughout the world today, means both that the potent brew is squeezed out of the grind and that it is done on the spot and quickly.

Although machine-made espresso is no older than the

twentieth century, coffee has been popular in Italy for hundreds of years. Like other good things, the beverage was introduced from Turkey by way of Venice, where coffeehouses already flourished around the middle of the seventeenth century. The upper Adriatic seaports and cities have remained the main coffee importing and roasting centers, and their famous old coffeehouses—the Caffè Florian on St. Mark's Square in Venice, the Caffè Pedrocchi in Padua, and the Caffè degli Specchi in Trieste—perpetuate an old tradition. Stendhal was a regular of the Pedrocchi.

The first espresso machines made their sibilant appearance around 1900. In 1907 an Italian patent was granted to Desiderio Pavoni of Milan for a contraption that through steam filtration could provide 150 cups of coffee an hour. Teresio Arduino in 1909 introduced his Victoria Arduino machine with a capacity of 1,000 cups per hour. These and similar early espresso *apparati* were upright metal urns, not unlike the Russian samovar, with gauges and handles that allowed boiling water and steam to be channeled to individual spigots equipped with filters that could be rapidly detached for replacement of the grinds. Improved models came with special pipes to inject steam into milk, both to heat it and to make it frothy for cappuccino.

The Victoria Arduino machine was surmounted by an eagle and became a beloved symbol of the espresso subculture. Installed in coffee bars all over Italy and in similar shops in Italian neighborhoods of cities in North and South America, such antiques are still in use, and other espresso bars have lately, in a nostalgic mood, ordered handcrafted replicas of the original model.

After World War II the upright urns were replaced by a new generation of low-slung espresso machines that looked like precision tools—lathes, maybe, or computers. The principle of filtering a mixture of hot water and steam under high pressure through coffee grinds remained unchanged, however.

The sight of the gleaming espresso machine with its dials, handles, tubes, and spigots, and the characteristic noise of hissing steam, the thump of filters being emptied and, with new loads, quickly put back in place, and the trickling of coffee from the spouts into the cups is as invigorating to Italians as is the aromatic brew itself. Operating a big unit in an espresso bar that may serve 10,000 cups a day requires the deftness and stamina of a virtuoso—that fine Italian hand again—to make sure the optimum mix of steam and water goes to the right spigots, the sensitive grinds are not overheated, and excessive filtering that would result in unpleasant bitterness is avoided. Counter men in smaller places cannot concentrate on the espresso machine alone; they must also serve other drinks, pastry, rolls, and snacks, not to mention maintain the flow of gossip and banter with regulars, some of them even patrons, that is an essential part of the espresso atmosphere.

Coffee bars all over Italy are as a rule sparkling with chromium, bright marble, clear colors, and garish neon lighting, and they are very clean. They represent the environment that most Italians like best—modernity, rational design, brilliant light, cheerfulness, loud voices, noncommittal badinage, and quick action. Italians do not usually feel comfortable in an English pub with its musty coziness, or in the heavy conviviality of a German beer hall, and they usually complain about the poor quality of coffee and the high consumption of alcohol in French cafés. Much of the coffee in Italy is drunk standing up at an espresso counter. One does not linger: five minutes for a cup is enough, ten minutes ample. Most espresso bars offer a wide range of refreshments besides coffee—soft drinks, beer, hard liquor, sandwiches, hamburgers, small pizzas, and gelato. However, coffee purists shun places where warm snacks are also served because the toasting or cooking odors spoil the heavenly smell of their nectar.

Many customers will not just order an espresso but add

specifications: *ristretto* (short and dense), *lungo* (diluted), *al vetro* (in a glass instead of in the customary ceramic cup), *macchiato* ("spotted" with a drop of hot or cold milk), *freddo* (iced, especially in summer), *corretto* (with a shot of brandy or grappa), or *senza schiuma* (without the ring of foam that most people like). If patrons do not sugar their coffee themselves, the counterman will ask them how sweet they want it, or whether they spurn sugar (*amaro*, bitter).

The operator of the espresso machine is called the *barista*, a term derived from the word *bar*, which the Italians long ago adopted from English. The *barista* is most often a young man who, in immaculate white, goes through the automatic motions of his trade and has the quick reflexes of a professional driver. He can field orders that half a dozen patrons shout at him at the same time, slam cups under the spouts of his machine, offer his contribution to a loud debate on the soccer championship, and still wink at a woman customer whose appearances have lately become frequent. Many Italians turn up at their favorite espresso bar three or four times every day, or are regulars at more than one such place—one around the corner from their business or office, another near their home, and maybe a third where they go on Sundays to discuss the soccer game they have just been watching on television. Scores of Italians who live abroad have told me that among the things they miss most is the possibility of dashing out of their home or place of work to a coffee bar for a quick cup of real espresso and a group of friendly faces.

In Italy itself some shops are especially renowned for the quality of their coffee. Local skills may have something to do with such excellence, but the main reason is believed to be the special properties of the water. Step into any espresso bar in Naples—under the central Galleria, in the warren of the Spanish Quarter, on the waterfront, or around the railroad terminal—and the counterman will take a small cup, preheated in a bath of warm water, put it under a spigot of his

machine, let plenty of steam pass through the freshly deep-roasted and ground coffee, and put before you a tiny quantity of dark, dense liquid with a thin wreath of brown foam at the top. Instant euphoria!

In Rome the coffee bars around the Pantheon are reputed to serve the best espresso and cappuccino because they are using the Aqua Virgo (Virgin Water). This water flows out of faucets and fountains in the city's core from an often-repaired and still functioning aqueduct that M. Vipsanius Agrippa, general and son-in-law of Emperor Augustus, built. According to the legend, a maiden discovered a clear spring in the hills east of Rome and led thirsty legionnaires to the site. The "virgin's water" was then harnessed, and Agrippa in 19 B.C. had it funneled through a ten-mile conduit to Rome to supply the Pantheon complex, including the famous circular temple and a system of baths, that his architects had erected ten years earlier. (The soft water is said also to be unequaled for cooking pasta.)

In Italian restaurants espresso usually completes a meal, coming after dessert or substituting for it. Many establishments operate their own machines, others send out to a nearby coffee bar if patrons order espresso. Whenever visitors are invited to a private home in Italy, they are likely to be offered Aunt Silvia's or Grandma Giovanna's famous espresso. They will be expected to smack their lips and proclaim it infinitely superior to the products of any coffee bar. Maybe it is, maybe not. Appliance and hardware stores do carry many newfangled models of espresso makers for the home, but the old, simple *macchinetta napoletana* (little Neapolitan machine)—comprising a metal container in which water is boiled and steam rises, a compartment in which the ground coffee is placed, and a filter through which the espresso oozes into a chamber, to be poured out through a spout—remains unsurpassed.

Gelato, an added money-maker for many coffee bars to-

day, has in its various forms been an Italian delight for a long time and has lately won legions of new aficionados in America who prefer it to industrially made ice cream.

In ancient Rome, rich epicures had snow brought in baskets from the high mountains of the country's interior to cool their drinks and fruits, and probably also to make some kinds of sherbets, but the real art of concocting sweet, icy drinks (and perhaps producing semisolid sweet and cold confections) was refined by Arabs, Persians, and Turks, whose Moslem religion forbade alcohol. The Sicilians, who were under Arab rule from the ninth to the eleventh century, were affected in their tastes by the sweet tooth of their Moslem masters and learned from them to turn out cold delicacies, often enriched with such local goodies as almonds and dried grapes. Sicilians are to this day the wizards of elaborate gelato, and of even more complex specialties such as *cassata*.

Soft, creamy gelato seems to have first been made in Italy in the seventeenth century. By the end of the eighteenth century, Italian *gelatai* (gelato vendors) had established themselves in various European cities, and in Paris, especially, Italian ices became the rage. *Gelatai* were among the founders of small Italian colonies in various places on the continent, and ever since their arrival Italians who have settled in other European countries, or who periodically arrive, with the swallows, in the warm season, have supplied Europeans with cold comfort during their more or less short summers.

For at least three thousand years, the Apennine Peninsula and Sicily have shared in the ancient Mediterranean and Middle Eastern wine civilization, already present in the Book of Genesis. The Romans learned viticulture from the Etruscans, whose fondness for carousing is attested to by the wall paintings in their burial chambers, and from the Greeks. In clas-

sical Rome Horace praised the Falernian vintages from Campania, while soldiers and even slaves were given less select wine with their food rations. In Italy wine has always been drunk for nourishment (it does, after all, provide calories and traces of minerals) as well as for pleasure.

At present, depending on the weather and the vagaries of the statistics, Italy is in some years just ahead of France or just behind as world leader in wine production. It also reports one of the highest per capita rates of wine consumption, although the quantity, which in the mid-1980s was still a remarkable 23 gallons annually for every man, woman, and child, is continually diminishing. Drunkenness in public places can nevertheless be observed in Italy much less frequently than in, say, Britain or the Soviet Union. With the new Italian affluence, it has become fashionable to drink imported hard liquor, and the nation has become one of the major markets for Scotch whiskeys.

The once ubiquitous wine flask, its bottom and belly covered with plaited straw to protect it from breakage (such flasks were also used for olive oil), has become a rarity. Apparent reappearances today are likely to be faked: What looks like straw is plastic. At the same time, Italians have become increasingly discriminating with regard to their country's vintages.

Connoisseurs from abroad, especially if they are French, may still dismiss most Italian wines as mediocre (with a few exceptions—some Barolos from Piedmont, Soaves from Verona, Valpolicelli from Venetia, some Chiantis, and perhaps white Capri), even though tankers full of heavy Apulian wine have been sailing, without much ado since World War II, to Southern France, where the *vino primitivo* (coarse wine) has been used to reinforce local vintages. Until recently such apparent indifference to wine quality was shared by Italians themselves; patrons in most *trattorie*, and even some of the

more pretentious restaurants, would routinely be asked by the waiter, often before they had had a chance to order their meal, "White or red [wine]?" Now even simple eating places will tell their guests where the wine comes from and offer a few bottled vintages. Many wine dealers have taken to calling their shops *enoteche* (a neologism suggesting a library with bottles instead of books on its shelves) and displaying hundreds of labels. Wineries have generally upgraded their products and developed new vintages. There has been some criminal doctoring too: In 1986 at least twenty-five Italians died from poisoning by wine spiked with methanol (methyl alcohol) to make it more potent. But despite such scandals, to be a vintner in Italy today is a glamorous profession, or it can be a hobby with snob cachet. Some practitioners of the age-old art of winemaking now turn out hundreds of thousands of bottles with fancy labels; others produce just a few thousand bottles that they painstakingly number and sign—designer vintages.

In just a few heady years the Italian wine industry has won new markets abroad, especially in the United States. Whereas once only the homey straw flasks with Chianti and some bottled Sicilian wines could be found in Little Italies and in Italian restaurants, a wide range of vintages from all regions of Italy are now sold in American liquor stores. (One anecdote has it that the owner of a winery near Modena showed a visitor three huge vats filled with Lambrusco, the sparkling red wine that should have a bouquet evocative of violets; the containers were labeled "Sweet," "Dry," and "America"—the plonk was destined for export to the United States.) In fact, the new American interest in Italian vintages is generally credited as a factor in changing the United States' perception of Italy—it is now seen as a country where people know how to get the best out of life.

That changed perception can also be appreciated in the

recent fortunes of Italian cuisine. Dishes that had for generations been commonplace in Italian homes, like risotto with mushrooms or spaghetti with clams, have made their appearance in deluxe restaurants abroad, while Italian cookbooks have started to crowd the shelves of American bookstores. The "Mediterranean diet"—lots of pasta, olive oil, little meat, and plenty of vegetables and fruits—has been touted by nutritionists in more "advanced" countries (even as the consumption of meat, butter, and sugar has been rising in Italy). For some years now international marathon runners have been filling up on pasta, and in 1988 Britain's Royal Army substituted spaghetti in plastic bags for the traditional cans of meat and beans as its field and combat rations.

Key to the exportation and international popularity of Italian gastronomy have been well-heeled Italian tourists—familiar characters everywhere, always asking for pasta, wine, and espresso; impressing, amusing, and occasionally annoying the natives with their panache, their cheerfulness, the stylishness of their women, their readiness to spend money in order to cut a fine figure (*far buona figura*, an important Italian phrase and concept).

Not so elegantly, but with no less aplomb, other Italians have been making money all over the world as contractors—all the while also hankering for pasta, wine, and espresso. Having profited and gathered experience at home through reconstruction work—largely financed by the Marshall Plan—after the ravages of World War II, they branched out into other countries and continents, building dams and roads in Africa and submitting winning bids for large-scale projects in distant places. Since antiquity, Italians have excelled in construction work—the flagstones of Roman roads are still found from Britain to Morocco to the Black Sea, and ruins of ancient triumphal arches, aqueducts, and amphitheaters from Spain to the Rhine, from the Danube to the Middle East,

That Fine Italian Hand

speak not only of past grandeur but also of architectural and engineering mastery. By volume of business, Italian contracting firms are today in the world's vanguard.

I think of such Italian builders and contractors, helping to spread the customs and manners of their home country, when I recall a visit to Iran during the last months of the shah's rule. Driving across a barren, remote stretch of countryside, I was startled to notice a road sign reading ESPRESSO. I followed the sign and reached a rudimentary coffee bar run by a camp follower for an Italian oil-drilling crew. And there it stood: a late-model coffee machine in the near desert—maybe Marco Polo had passed through here seven hundred years earlier?—marking an outpost of that expanding realm of Italianate tastes, the espresso empire.